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## THE MORAL IDEAL.

FELIX ADLER.

THE purpose of this paper is to state why, in the writer's opinion, the moral ideal should be conceived of as a supreme society rather than as a supreme individual.

The term 'ideal' may be taken in two senses: It may mean the idea of a non-existent thing, or state of being, or mode of conduct, regarded as worthy of being realized. In this sense we speak of the ideal human form, the ideal of happiness, the ideal of scientific accuracy, and the like. Or we may think of the ideal as an object in which the desired perfection, whatever it be, is realized already. The two senses tend to glide into one another. The perfect, or the adumbration of the perfect, already achieved, becomes exemplary. A great epic, like the *Iliad*, becomes the model, the excellence of which Virgil aims to reproduce in the *Æneid*, Goethe in *Hermann und Dorothea*. Bayard is the ideal which the younger chivalry accept as their prototype. The method of Darwin exercises its influence as a standard upon scientific investigators the world over. On the other hand, we seek to embody whatever conceit or vision of perfection we may entertain in an object, and thereby give it that permanence and definiteness of which, as a purely subjective product of the mind, it would be destitute.

The ideal may thus be said to subserve two ends: that

of repose and that of stimulation; the former, in furnishing to the mind an object in the contemplation of which its desires are quieted, its quest of completeness terminated,—the other, in supplying a spur to the active side of human nature toward continued exertion in the direction of its highest good.

The topic to be here treated is, whether, in view of the stage of ethical development actually reached, the idea of God as a supreme individual is capable of expressing the moral ideal, using the latter designation both in its objective and in its exemplary meaning.

The following statement may serve to prepare the way for the conclusion to be reached later on. The theistic idea pure and simple is void of content, and cannot, therefore, as such, be an object of contemplation. We are capable of attaching a definite significance to knowledge, but not to omniscience; to power, but not to omnipotence; to goodness, but not to all-holiness. The great religious thinkers have agreed that God in his essential being is inscrutable. Nevertheless theism has afforded a distinct object to the imagination of its followers. It has succeeded in doing so: (a) By the negation of limits: God is the Infinite. Imagine any portion of space, however extended,—it is unable to inclose him; imagine any sequence of time, however prolonged,—it is unable to bound him. (b) By the method of analogy,—“a thousand years are in his sight as a day.” Continue to add other thousands of years to the first, and there will arise, by analogy, an indistinct image of endless duration. (c) By the method of contrast. “Canst thou bind Leviathan?” Leviathan defies man’s puny strength, yet it is subject to the power of God. (d) By various metaphors. Among those most commonly employed are the military metaphor, the royalist metaphor, the pastoral metaphor, the domestic or patriarchal metaphor. It goes without saying that none of these cover, or can cover, the metaphysical ideas of omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect righteousness.

But the most effective means of suggesting the divine individual as an object, is to expatiate upon the supposed effects derivative from him as their cause, and to transfer the feeling which these effects excite to their author. The distinctness in this case is on the side of the phenomena under review. The author in his own person remains behind the scene, vague and uncertain in outline; but the sense of definiteness with respect to him is produced by the firmness with which the phenomenal effects are grasped. God as creator, and God as providence; God as the author of the order of nature, and God as moral ruler, are the two capital concepts of theism to which I refer.

Modern philosophy has relinquished as insoluble the problem of origins. The evolutionary theory has loosened the foundations of the doctrine of providential supervision in its traditional sense. It is possible that creation and regulative supervision may be restated in some altered sense. What it behooves us here to consider is that both these ways of looking upon the world have lost their usefulness as means of imparting definiteness to the idea of a supreme individual as an object presented to the imagination. We can no longer think of God as of a *mécanicien céleste*, nor, save in poetic moods, as of a pilot steering the ship of human destiny.

But our interest centers on the moral ideal in its exemplary aspect. Can an individual, assumed to be supreme,—can any individual serve as a universal pattern upon which all human beings may fashion their conduct?

This question may, indeed, be answered affirmatively with respect to a certain stage in the moral progress of the race. An individual can serve as an example of perfect morality as long as the moral code is restricted to, or at any rate chiefly has in view, those rules of conduct which may be imposed upon all alike, irrespective of the differences of age, sex, calling, temperament, etc. At a time when it is held that all individuals are moral

in the same fashion, it is practicable to set up one individual as completely moral, *i. e.*, as performing in an entirely adequate way those acts which all others are required to perform in a similar way. The theistic stage is that in which uniformity is the hall mark of morality, in which the fundamental likeness of human beings to one another is the lesson still to be learned; in which the virtues to be taught are those prescribed toward all persons and in all relations. These virtues are chiefly justice, mercy, and purity; and accordingly we find in the theistic scriptures, whenever the deity is represented as a model, that these virtues stand out preëminent. God acts justly: "Shall not the Judge of all the world deal righteously?" He is the prototype of justice which men are to copy.

God is merciful: "He is long-suffering and patient, showing mercy to thousands of them that love him." Men are to be merciful as he is: "For what does Jahveh exact of thee but to act justly and to deal mercifully?" And the supreme individual is also called 'holy,' a term of many subtle connotations, of which I hold purity to be the determining one. "And holy shall ye be, for I, Jahveh, your God, am holy." It must, however, be noted that the supreme individual, in so far as he embodies the ideal, represents the virtues mentioned, not as separate, piecemeal items of goodness, but as constituents of perfection; and man likewise is expected to aspire toward realizing in himself the unity of these virtues: "Be ye therefore perfect." Moreover, God being the ideal, man is expected to bear in mind the distance which separates him from his ideal; and hence, in the classical passage from Micah, which I have quoted, summing up the whole duty of man, the climax describing the ethico-religious attitude, the final perfection, is "to walk humbly with thy God."

The position taken is that monotheism is the appropriate religious counterpart of that period in moral history in which the ethical code consists of virtues that

are to be practiced in the same way by all individuals. When this period of development has been passed, the moral scene changes. In consequence of the increased differentiation of human society, what is called the organic nature of human relations now comes into view. The organic idea lays the same stress on multiplicity as on unity, on diversity as on likeness. The organic idea is that of a system of parts, each of which is charged with some specific function unlike that of its associates. To speak of common ends in such a system were misleading. The end in view is unitary rather than common, and it is achieved by a diversity of procedures which mutually stimulate, and in this sense supplement, each other. The perfect organ is that which enhances the specific action of its correlates, and receives from them in its own accelerated processes the retroactive influence of their stimulation.

Applying this conception to human society, we perceive the profound changes in the idea of morality which necessarily follow from it. Instead of uniformity of action in the pursuit of common ends, functional differences in reciprocal adjustment supply the index of what is moral. Among the actual human differences are those of sex, age, of specific mental, emotional, æsthetic, and volitional endowment, etc., and the play of the influences due to these differences constitutes the text of the moral life and development of human society.

The effect this changed conception, this new emphasis on the differences, must have on the moral ideal is obvious. The moral excellence, for instance, of a woman is unlike that of a man, and no masculine God can serve as the pattern upon which she shall model her conduct. Men have a decided voice in determining what is fine in woman. But an example must serve to instruct the person using it in the way in which the desired results are to be reached, and the example of a man or a man-God cannot serve to this end. Again, the excellence of the adolescent is different from that of the ripe, experi-

enced man; and the youth cannot take the patriarchal God as his exemplar.

A certain general law of morality, indeed, may be stated on the basis of the organic principle, namely, the very law of reciprocity or interaction: the law that every function must be so fulfilled as to speed the rest. But the value of this law lies in its specific applications, and these must be left to the persons who are conversant with the problems which any particular species of functional activity presents. The outcome of what has been said is, that an act is moral not in proportion as it is standardized, but as it is individualized, in the degree to which it is unlike other moral acts, though based on the same fundamental principle, not in the degree to which it resembles them.

No single supreme individual, then, can, under these terms, embody the moral ideal. The Godhead conceived of as a single being may be designated as infinite, but infinite in such connection means a certain type, or, as we shall now say, the discharge of a certain social function raised to the *n*th degree. The bearer of that function is represented as performing it in the most perfect manner possible. But he cannot be the true embodiment of perfection, because other functions, equally indispensable, are excluded from the conception of him. It may be that he is represented as the divine father. In that case, the function of fatherhood is idealized or raised to the *n*th degree; but motherhood, sisterhood, brotherhood, etc., are omitted.

It may be that he is represented as the friend, the brother, the equal of other spirits, in the fashion in which Christ is presented in the New Testament; but then it is not possible to conceive of him simultaneously from the parental and the other points of view. The doctrine of the Trinity, as formulated in the Christian Church, is perhaps the logical outcome of this felt defect; and the writer admits, in view of these considerations that in the controversy between trinitarianism and

unitarianism, his sympathies would incline to the side of the former rather than of the latter.

Shall we then say that the moral ideal is to be regarded as dispersed into an endless number of perfections, rather than as combined in a unit of perfection? Do we reach the conclusion that hereafter we are to have many moral ideals instead of one: an ethical ideal of marriage, an ideal of parenthood, of friendship, of citizenship, of the cosmopolitan relation? And if this is to be so, will not the coherence, the unity of the moral ideal be abolished? The answer to this objection is that the unity of the moral ideal is guaranteed by the unity of the principle which underlies all the subordinate ethical ideals, namely, the organic principle of enhancing correlative functions and thereby perfecting one's own. Further, consciousness of the ideal as unitary is produced by the circumstance that in proportion as we advance in life the moral ideals open out in a series. We pass from the home group into the school, from the school or schools into the calling, thence consciously into membership of the nation, and so on. The circle at the center, with a short radius, expands into wider circles, sending forth, moreover, numerous epicycles, in the process of expansion, and at the same time we become aware of the single controlling idea which determines the whole process: an idea which gains in richness of content, but which none the less remains identical amid the diversity of its utterances and effects. The unity of the moral ideal is thus maintained even if we look upon the moral field only from the static point of view, recognizing the same principle in the many subordinate ideals,—still more if we regard our moral experience from the dynamic point of view, as a product ever changing, ever being made over, yet as the work or works of one and the same fundamental creative impulse.

It may be serviceable briefly to summarize results stated or implicit in what has preceded.



I. General result. Instead of a perfect individual, the moral ideal is to be described as a perfect society.

II. The abstract definition of perfection. Instead of omniscience, omnipotence, and entire goodness realized in a single being, infinite organism, *i. e.*, perfection, realized in a numerically and qualitatively infinite community of beings, each fulfilling its eternally distinctive function in such a manner as not only to agree with, but to make possible, the completely adequate fulfillment of distinctive function by its correlates.

III. Actual human society, the concrete basis upon which this ideal structure is to be superimposed, supplies meaning to the abstract relations stated, while conversely, the abstract ideal furnishes a margin of infinitely possible extension to the system of human relationships upon which it operates.

IV. The creative endeavor to realize, or approximate to the realization of, the infinite organic scheme in terms of actual social progress replaces worship in the older sense as homage toward a single being regarded as embodying in himself the totality of moral excellence. Union with the infinite is the experience within oneself of the compelling impulse that issues from the idea of infinite organism and the sense that the worth of life consists, despite the tragical shortcomings, in unremitting effort to yield obedience to the impulse. In this sense the words of Faust may be accepted as true:

Im Weiterschreiten find' er Qual und Glueck,  
Er, unbefriedigt jeden Augenblick.<sup>1</sup>

FELIX ADLER.

NEW YORK.

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between the modification of theism, known as the doctrine of immanence, and the ethical idealism outlined in the above, is to be found in the circumstance that from the former point of view the element of unity is still regarded as superior in rank and reality to plurality. It is the One who works and manifests himself in all the various disguises. From the latter point of view, the two notions of unity and plurality, of identity and difference, are treated as equal in rank.